INCONTINENT BACKPACKS

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He was walking down the street with his phone held like a holy relic, camera facing him, face doing the influencer aerobics routine — smile, smirk, blink, wink, smirk again — all while talking into it.
"There is no need for such tense conflict," he cooed, saccharine as chamomile tea. "Not everything is political, guys."

Reality disagreed.
A dull *thud* announced it. Septum: compromised. Blood: Jackson Pollock'd across the pavement. Two teeth: declared independence midair.

Nathan, standing there with a calm that suggested long acquaintance with both philosophy and assault charges, flexed his knuckles like punctuation marks.

"Everything *is* political, you dumb cunt."

Then, as he filled out the police report later, under "Description of incident," he wrote: *My freedom of movement was unconstitutionally restricted by the unsolicited presence of his nose.*

"What the fuck is wrong with these people?" mumbled Nathan, casually stomping the twelve-monthly-salary phone into glitter and following up with two or three gentle, educational kicks to the ribs.

Political, he thought. They said it as if it were any other adjective — *fabulous*, *laxative*. Politics, to them, was some extracurricular hobby, a thing you had to stand up for, make an effort, like shoveling coal into a furnace or speaking French to a Frenchman.

But *polís*—that was everyone, the whole ensemble of us idiots pretending to coexist. So

everything we do with everyone else—*(rib kick)*—is politics.

"You were just making faces and talking nonsense in the real universal ἀγορά," he explained to the motionless body, "where the *polís* actually happens."
(rib kick)

Then, with the air of a man finishing a public lecture, he raised his foot one last time.
"Oh, and now just *dare* tell me there's no such thing as society—just men, women, and families."

The foot hovered a moment, considering metaphysics, before deciding the influencer had already graduated. The man was asleep. For good.

"Let's not get into politics," Nathan went on, rambling to himself and to whoever had the misfortune of existing within hearing range.

"'Guys, let's not get politics into this,' or 'leave politics out of it.' Sure, and while we're at it, let's not get into *breathing air* during this meeting, nor sit down due to *gravity.*"

He stopped mid-tirade, spotted a kid standing by a cotton-candy cart.
"Are *you* one of those?" Nathan shouted.

The kid, startled, dropped his ice-cream cone, released his balloon to the heavens, and froze like a deer at a philosophy lecture. Then, after brief reflection, he shook his head and said, "No, sir."

"Good," Nathan nodded, resuming his rant. "One of *those*, I was saying, who mistake politics for political *parties.* Like confusing breathing with *air conditioning.*"

The boy, now wholly converted, forgot his ice cream, his balloon, his childhood — and fell in step behind Nathan, marching solemnly down

the street like a miniature disciple, the way they used to behind Dr. King.

"Minimum state, you want? Minimum state?" Nathan was now addressing the city at large, arms wide, face red, voice like a jazz trumpet mid-solo. "Well guess what, dumbo — *that's a political proposal too!* You're not advocating for *less politics*, you're advocating for *less public structure!* You illiterate rednecks!"

He spun toward the kid like a professor demanding confirmation from the only student still awake.
"Am I right?"

The boy clenched his tiny fist, eyes blazing with incomprehension and purpose.
"Incontinent backpacks!" he roared.

Nathan nodded with solemn pride, as if a new republic had just been declared.
"That's the spirit."

"You vote null? Or decide not to vote?" Nathan shouted to no one in particular and everyone in earshot. "*Brilliant!* Guess what? That's a political choice too, you post-ideological jellyfish! You're not opting out, you're just calling yourself in—quietly!"

He paced a few steps, warming up.
"Of course, it might be an *educated, meditated* position," he went on, voice dropping to academic. "'I have carefully examined all the proposals reaching the ballots, and they are all so far from my worldview that I see no point in participating this time.' Fine. Respectable. A position requiring information, reflection, maybe even a discussion with all running candidates."

Then, a switch flipped.
"*Or*, or—*OR!*—you might just say: 'Left and right are the same, they all steal!' A position requiring only the age of eighteen and not more than one opposable out of two thumbs."

He turned to the kid.
"Can you oppose your thumbs, kid?"

The boy, solemn as a prophet, flipped both birds at once.

Nathan nodded, radiant with pedagogical pride.
"Precisely."

"You're an anarchist?" Nathan asked a young man wearing a black hoodie with a circle-A drawn like a child's sun. "Why, *tremendous!* The noble line of thought! The art of keeping rulers *in line*—" he paused, smirked, "pun intended—*ruler, line,* get it? Hah! Hilarious."

He was warming up now, the crowd unsure whether to flee or take notes.
"Bakunin! Gaetano Bresci! Pietro Gori! *'Our motherland is the whole world, our law is freedom!'*—that's the stuff!"

Then Nathan squinted at the boy.
"Oh no, no? You're not *that* kind of anarchist, huh? Oh, I see. For you 'anarchist' means *I don't wanna choose, choices are difficult, I'm just against everything.*"

He nodded gravely, reached into his coat pocket, and pulled out an imaginary candy. "Sure, moonpie. Here. Go sit at the *very special kids* table. Try to drool on yourself as little as possible. And, for the love of Bakunin, don't swallow the Lego bricks."

The kid disciple, marching faithfully beside him, lifted both fists in the air and shouted, "Incontinent backpacks!"

"Exactly," Nathan said, beaming like a man who had just educated a nation.

"Is it something without impact on the rest of people?" Nathan asked, loud enough for pigeons to judge him. "Like the number of

fingers you stick in your nose — let's leave it at 'nose' — or the positions you prefer to fuck your consenting adult significant other. Private. Personal. Not political."

He paced, hands carving the air. "However complicated you want to make the language, does it *involve others*? Does it shove itself into the room with other people? Does it limit their movement — like where you leave your nose if my fist wants to move?" He mimed the obstruction with theatrical disgust. "If it touches others, it's about others. If it concerns many, it's potentially about *all*. That's politics."

He smiled a small, ugly smile. "And sooner or later someone has to talk about it and agree on the rules. Like the number of people around us we want killed — none, all, or any fashionable combinatory subset in the middle, depending on the season's aesthetic. Right, kid?"

The kid, who only spoke when instructed and otherwise behaved like a tiny, militant statue, had silently slipped on black gloves. He kept his head down, gloved fist clenched, a small black panther folded into a scarf of cotton candy and solemnity.

Nathan nodded at him as if receiving an exam answer. The city hummed — a car alarm, a woman swearing, an old man clapping slowly somewhere offstage — and Nathan, satisfied, let the sentence hang like a gauntlet tossed onto the pavement.

Nathan: Do you know what the poet said, kid?
Kid:
Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

Nathan *(blinks)*: Yes... but—
Kid:

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils?

Nathan *(double blinks)*: Yes, also that, but—
Kid:
April is the cruellest month...

Nathan: Kid! Disciple... in *disciplin*!
Kid: Yes, sir.
Nathan: As I was *saviantly* saying, the poet said—

(He plants himself on a bench as if about to deliver commandments.)

Freedom is not sitting up in a tree,
Nor is it the flight of a blowfly.
Freedom is not an open space—
Freedom is participation.

(Beat. He looks heavenward. Then repeats, louder, as if invoking thunder.)

Freedom is not sitting up in a tree,
Nor even having an opinion.
Freedom is not an open space—
Freedom is participation.

(The kid raises his gloved fist in silent salute.)

Freedom is not sitting up in a tree,
Nor is it a gesture or invention.
Freedom is not an open space—
Freedom is participation.

Nathan bows slightly, as though concluding mass.
The kid whispers, "Incontinent backpacks."
Nathan smiles. "Exactly, my little panther. Exactly."

You see, reader, the boy believed he understood. His small head was full of capital ideas and lowercase comprehension. Inside him, words like *freedom* and *politics* and *Bakunin* swirled together with balloons, ice

cream, and the memory of a cartoon he once saw where a lion wore sunglasses and sang about sharing.

He thought politics meant marching with someone taller, and freedom meant not having to ask before taking another candy. Participation, he decided, was when people looked at you while you did something, anything at all. He was sure that if Nathan ever became president of anything, everyone would have to wear black gloves and shout important things they didn't understand. He liked that idea.

In his mind, the crowd that had gathered earlier was still there — clapping, cheering, chanting "Incontinent backpacks!" like a hymn. Somewhere between his ears and his thoughts, he'd placed himself on a stage, holding a lollipop as a microphone, ready to explain the world to ants.

The boy had no doubt that he'd just witnessed something large and luminous, like seeing the inside of lightning. He didn't know what it meant, and it didn't bother him at all. Understanding was for adults. He had enough just feeling the tremor of Nathan's words still ringing through the soles of his little shoes.

And if you'd looked at him just then — the small gloved fist hanging loose by his side, the solemn face turned up to nowhere in particular — you'd think he had learned something profound.
He hadn't. But it looked beautiful on him.